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SUBJECT: GAZA BORDER UPDATE JANUARY 29, PT. II

REF: CAIRO 148

¶1. On January 29, econoff and FSN traveled from El Arish to the border crossing at Rafah, encountering little traffic all the way to the commercial customs terminal. There were thirty central security trucks on the highway between El Arish and Rafah, and state security officers blocked side roads and footpaths from the town of Sheikh Zuweid to Rafah, a distance of about ten kilometers. The commercial terminal appeared to be closed.

¶2. The non-commercial Salah ad Din border crossing in downtown Rafah was heavily congested with people and traffic, as well as swampy from the rains. There were several thousand Palestinians buying, selling, and trading, or simply hanging out in Rafah before trickling slowly back to Gaza with crates of cigarettes, cases of soda, sheep, goats, electronics, a few cattle, and all sorts of other consumer goods, using trucks, taxis, and even donkey carts -- all with Gaza license plates.

¶3. Despite all the muck and congestion and uncertainty, there was no apparent tension. Egyptian security forces were present in Rafah, but not in overwhelming numbers. They seemed to be channeling the Palestinians with relative efficiency toward the border.

¶4. Returning to El Arish, econoff encountered only light traffic and a few pedestrians heading east, towards Gaza. The few westbound cars on the highway were stopped at checkpoints for inspection. The roads were calm. An Egyptian businessman told econoff that two Hamas members had crossed the border to track down a Fatah "collaborator" in El Arish. They trashed a hotel looking for him, but he got away, and they returned to Gaza, according to the businessman. Another businessman said that he was ordered to close his shop, rather than being forced to close because he had run out of supplies, as had happened to many others.

¶5. Separately, Egyptian security sources have told us that the border is still open, but foot traffic has slowed to a trickle. They say that the GOE is blocking the resupply of Al Arish and Rafah area shops. The shops are, consequently, very low on supplies, and many shops have closed altogether. Egyptian security contacts believe that the number of Palestinians trying to enter Egypt has shrunk due to bad weather (rain and unusually low temperature) and the lack of supplies in Egyptian shops.

¶6. According to security contacts, four Border Guard Force members are still in serious condition with the following injuries: one soldier lost an eye when he was hit by a stone; one soldier was severely burned when the armored vehicle he was traveling exploded flames after being hit by a grenade; and two soldiers are hospitalized with gunshot wounds. Palestinian snipers also shot five dogs used by the Border Guard Forces.

¶7. Our consular colleagues report that two AmCit-Palestinian families from Gaza made it to our consular section and have subsequently departed Cairo for the U.S. after we confirmed with Egyptian immigration that they would have no trouble in exiting Egypt (they didn't). Also, Canadian diplomats told us that they

have received two Canadian-Palestinian families from Gaza at their embassy in Cairo. There are also reports of Gazans reaching Beni Sweif (about 100 km south of Cairo), and as many as 3000 Gazans at Suez. The British tell us that they are considering making changes to their travel warning, though none of the European embassies we have spoken to have made any changes yet. Finally, Soliman Awad reportedly told the Canadian ambassador January 24 that "We will rebuild the fence."

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